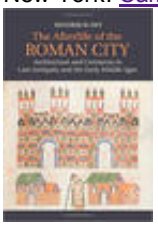
8-6-2015

Book Review: Hendrik W. Dey, The Afterlife of the Roman City: Architecture and Ceremony in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Jelena Bogdanović
Iowa State University, jelenab@iastate.edu

caa.reviews
critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies
published by the College Art Association
caa
Donate to *caa.reviews*
August 6, 2015

Hendrik W. Dey
The Afterlife of the Roman City: Architecture and Ceremony in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages
New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 296 pp.; 8 color ills.; 12 b/w ills. Cloth $99.00 (9781107069183)



Jelena Bogdanović

CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2015.95

The latest book by Hendrik W. Dey examines the afterlife of the Roman city in the territories of the erstwhile Roman Empire until roughly the ninth century. As a scholar with multiple threads of training in classics, Dey writes his book with a strong archaeological research method that emphasizes the perseverance of urban paradigms of the Greco-Roman world beyond literary tropes or oversimplified economical and demographical analyses. *The Afterlife of the Roman City* looks in particular at monumental architecture and urban topography by highlighting their importance in the definition of the urban space as a place of ceremonial manifestations of the glory of kings, emperors, caliphs, and bishops during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

The question of cities has captured scholarly attention for a long time, especially in light of the fall and urban decline of the city of Rome, which epitomized Western civilization, and of the observable shrinking and dissolution of major urban centers during the early medieval period (ca. seventh–ninth centuries). Hence, some scholars dub the early Middle Ages the “Dark Ages,” often dramatized through capitalization. Dey embarks on an ambitious project that aims to reclaim the city and urban living during this period, while at the same time asking why some ancient Roman cities disintegrated and never revived while others prevailed over time even in economically daunting and politically unstable circumstances. Dey frames his investigation with the cities of late antiquity and then provides an insight into their afterlife and transformation during the early Middle Ages. His primary sources are archaeological, complemented by a study of selected texts ranging from ancient chronicles and epistolary accounts to hagiographical and theological texts; his range of sources emphasizes that our modern separation between secular and sacred cannot apply to the period of investigation and that selected sources of different genres remain highly relevant for understanding the material and social constructs of the examined cities.

The book is divided into five topical chapters that are also broadly chronological and outline the emergence of new political entities following the dissolution of the ancient Roman Empire. The introductory chapter, “Urban Living and the ‘Fall’ of the Roman Empire,” presents the structure of the book along with the three most important layers of investigation of the city in the territories of the geographically and politically defined eastern and western halves of the (former) Roman Empire. These three layers highlight the typology of public buildings and infrastructure that framed civic and ecclesiastical rituals and ceremonies; the urban topography and the traditions of urban living that were animated and inspired by continual construction as well as the importance of monumental architecture and urban infrastructure; and the subsequent claim for the continuity of the Hellenistic idea of the city between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The introduction also provides a dense overview of the immense divide in scholarship as to whether the fall of Rome in the fifth century marked the beginning of the fall of the city and urban living during the early Middle Ages. Dey argues that “the continuous importance of monumental architecture and urban lifestyles in the cultural matrix of the postclassical period ultimately depend on the

premise that urban living was a defining characteristic of Roman . . . society" (2). The major premise is that the noted "shrinking" of the cities should be understood as a result of a "more coherent spatial logic" (10) while the disintegration of cities happened more rapidly in the territories occupied by people with limited exposure to Roman culture and urban lifestyle (14), thus highlighting his central thesis that cities remained critical in postclassical societies "because Byzantine emperors, Western kings, bishops, and . . . Umayyad caliphs wanted and needed them to exist as crucial tokens of the power and patronage that these leaders sought to project" (15).

The second chapter, "New Urban Forms for a New Empire: The Third Century and the Genesis of the Late Antique City," opens with the case study of Philippopolis in modern-day Syria. This third-century urban project of the Roman emperor Marcus Julius Philippus, also known as Philip the Arab, is taken as a crucial example for understanding the late antique city and its close relation to human agency. The analysis expands upon other imperial sites with a particular focus on cities thriving in the eastern half of the empire, such as Antioch and Thessaloniki. Locations such as Diocletian's "palace" in Split and Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad) are here recognized as miniature-sized cities rather than imperial palaces. The chapter highlights the importance of a formation of the standardized compressed city plan with recognizable architectural elements of a Roman imperial city—such as city walls, covered porticated streets along cardinal directions (cardo and decumanos), and closely aligned monumental civic architecture such as tetrapyla, baths, and the palace—in the embodiment of the desires of Roman emperors to present themselves as city founders for posterity and to display their power.

The third chapter, "Ceremonial Armatures: Porticated Streets and Their Architectural Appendages," effectively demonstrates the increasing connection between imperial and ecclesiastical processions, which occurred in the architectural spaces of covered streets marked by porticoes (colonnaded or arcaded) that connected the major buildings in the city. The case studies come from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Byzantine territories that continued to thrive after the fall of Rome and even in the post-seventh-century period: Constantinople, Antioch, Ephesus, and the cities formulated by Hellenistic principles (some of them built anew), including Zenobia, Justiniana Prima (Caričin Grad), Ravenna, and Jerusalem. Dey argues that the physical, conceptual, and functional legacy of urban processions allowed for "the nexus between urban topography and . . . spatial praxis—the use and experience of lived space—in the . . . transitional centuries between the late antiquity and the early Middle Ages" (126).

In his most extensive and controversial chapter, "'Dark Ages' and the Afterlife of the Classical City," Dey expands upon the premise that the dissolution of the recognizable Hellenistic urban topography and fabric during the transitional period (seventh–ninth centuries) is the result of the loss of the previously established spatial praxis among the newcomers (often conquerors), who were unfamiliar with it. Building upon archeological and textual sources, Dey questions previous studies that established that the decrease of cities was due to radical reorganization of administrative and fiscal systems, as suggested by historians working within a Marxist methodological framework (J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture*, rev. ed., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Dey recognizes the economic and political instability in the wider region, the emergence of new cities with new fabric (such as Shumen, in modern-day Bulgaria, for example), but highlights the understudied role of the holders of high offices (both civic and ecclesiastical) and their need for a display of authority in an urban setting as the major reason why some Roman cities survived in the seventh and eighth centuries, despite the often radical changes of their urban landscapes. Case studies include Visigothic Recópolis, Visigothic and Umayyad Mérida, Toledo, Merovingian Tours, Cologne, Lombard Pavia, Benevento, Byzantine Corinth, Amorium, Ephesus, Miletus, Anazarbos, Umayyad Anjar, Aila (Aqaba), Damascus, and Jerash. In the discussion of newly built Umayyad sites such as Anjar (variously known as both a city and a palace among Islamicists), built by Byzantine prisoners of war, Dey perhaps misses an opportunity to connect the principles of the Umayyad city design to some earlier examples, such as the recognition of Diocletian's palace or Felix Romuliana as miniature cities rather than palaces. This would only strengthen his argument concerning what constituted cities in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The most thought-provoking and inspiring chapter, in my opinion, is the final one: "Postscript: Architecture, Ceremony, and Monastic Cities in Carolingian Francia." It speaks of "monastic cities," or, rather, monasteries with high urbanity, inclusive of urban fabrics and ways of living. He supports his claim by analyzing Charlemagne's city-palace in Aachen along with familiar ninth-century Carolingian monasteries and highlights them from the point of view of their urban character: St. Riquier (Centula), Lorsch Abbey, and San Vincenzo al Volturno. His comparisons with Constantinopolitan-Byzantine urban culture are convincing and call for further studies to elaborate in greater detail.

The Afterlife of the Roman City ends with somewhat hastily presented conclusions, highlighting a proposed platform for the studies of late antique and early medieval cities with a focus on the integration of urban forms and the ceremonials performed

in public spaces.

In his approach, Dey essentially aligns with scholars who follow methods of social evolutionism in the archeological studies of built environment, here focusing on physical forms as a backdrop or result of human activities (various urban ceremonies and religious rites), hence reducing individual contributions to those of rulers or ecclesiastical leaders. Drawing from poststructuralist and postcolonial studies, the text is intended for well-educated readers. Yet, those exacting scholars may object to the under-theorized discussion of the city beyond its definition given through the Hellenistic notion of the *polis* and physically explained through monumental architecture and related enclosing walls. Simply put, it remains unclear how a city (or town) then differs from a castle or a citadel. Similarly, some scholars may take issue with the use of certain terminology and related theoretical and historical meanings in the context of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. For example, urbanization, as both term and concept, was introduced only in the nineteenth century (Ildefonso Cerdá, *Teoría general de la urbanización* [General Theory of Urbanization], Madrid: Impr. Española, 1867). The discussion of the "spatial-syntax" method, which has been both used and criticized by architects since its formulation in the 1970s, is introduced in the conclusions (248) and not effectively examined in the rest of the book. Furthermore, Dey himself highlights the shortcomings of any comparative works today, which are prone to critiques due to their generalizations (18).

Notwithstanding such potential shortcomings, Dey should be congratulated for taking on this demanding study that for the first time provides a comparative and coherent analysis of the cities in the eastern territories of the Roman Empire (which continued its life as the Byzantine Empire), in the emerging Germanic kingdoms in the former territories of the western half of the ancient Roman Empire, and in the Muslim Umayyad caliphate in the former Roman territories in the Mediterranean. The well-illustrated and carefully presented material also evokes some personal memories for me, as I recognize several drawings of city plans from the medieval Balkans, which I delineated for Slobodan Ćurčić's monumental work, *Architecture in the Balkans: From Diocletian to Süleyman the Magnificent, c. 300–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), and here, in Dey's book, they are effectively used to complement comparative material.

The Afterlife of the Roman City is an important book that will be of particular interest to archaeologists, historians of architecture and urban planning, art historians, as well as to researches of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages examined from multiple perspectives and disciplines in the humanities and arts. Dey's approach selectively and intelligently integrates the late antique and medieval cities in the Balkans and the wider territories of the Byzantine Empire, as well as those in the Visigothic Kingdom, Merovingian Gaul, Lombard Italy, and the Umayyad Levant, and offers numerous further possibilities for cross-cultural and integrative studies of the fascinating world of the Middle Ages.

Jelena Bogdanović
Assistant Professor, College of Design, Iowa State University
jelenab@iastate.edu